

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A RURAL KANSAS SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Implications for citizen involvement in public policy formulation is a very appropriate and timely topic. We have experienced significant changes in the last few years, with the emergence of new special interest groups—groups that have not traditionally been politically involved, certainly not to the extent which they are now. In addition, people are expressing frustration regarding the two major political parties. The corresponding rise in the influence of political figures who have not been mainstream party activists, such as Ross Perot and Colin Powell, is threatening to change the complexion of the American political scene.

The question for our discussion is not, should there be or will there be citizen involvement, *but* rather, which citizens—only special interest groups or a wide spectrum of the general public.

It is imperative that the general public become more involved in, and have a better understanding of, the decision making process. If we are to have a truly responsible and effective government, the public must understand and actively consider the policy choices that are before society, if they are to help determine the course our public officials pursue. Including the public in the decision making process from the beginning, will increase the likelihood that the policy will be politically supported, funded and implemented (Graves, *Nation's Cities Weekly*. 1995).

A caveat, which needs to be clarified at this point in our discussion, is that virtually all decision making processes in the public arena are involved in the political process, whether it be at the local city council, the state legislature, Congress, local school district, or the university level.

Before I discuss citizen involvement from the perspective of a state senator representing a very rural constituency, it is important to examine some of the power shifts we are witnessing from a national and state perspective. To date, the rural districts have not experienced the same degree of shift to the right that has been experienced by the more urban areas—but that may change in the near future.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the low voter turnout we are experiencing in our election process is caused by voter apathy. A more in-depth

examination of the situation will demonstrate that we find ourselves confronting a pervasive sense of political impotence among the American people. This impotence grows out of a politics of disconnection—where citizens find little access to the process of politics; where they feel overwhelmed by a political system that seems to be running beyond their control; where citizens believe their relationship with public officials is perilously near to being severed; where citizens believe there is only a muffled “public voice.” (The Harwood Group, 1991, p. 52).

A major concern of the electorate is the perception that two forces have converged to usurp much of the influence in the political process that rightly belongs to the people. The first force is that the political system is now designed to respond to special interest groups and lobbyists, rather than individual citizens. The other force, seen as more pernicious, is that campaign contributions seem to determine political outcomes more than voting (The Harwood Group, 1991, p. v).

The issue is not whether these perceptions are correct, but rather that, in politics, perception can be reality.

Indeed, citizens want to participate in the political process, if they feel they can make a difference—that their voices will be heard—that public officials are truly listening. The public will participate when they believe there is at least the *possibility* of creating and seeing change. They want public officials to be accountable.

As we examine the implications of citizen involvement in the formulation of public policy, it is helpful to have an understanding of the entities who have traditionally been active in the political process and the traditional avenues for activism, as well as the emerging activists and the tactics which have been successfully employed by these new groups. In addition, we need to consider factors which encourage or inhibit participation in the political process.

Special interest groups, such as the Farm Bureau, senior citizen’s groups, Kansas National Education Association and Kansas Bankers Association, to name just a few, have been major players in the political scene in Kansas for many years. These groups are very influential in a rural district such as mine. I am certain that similar special interest groups dealing primarily with occupation-related interests or economic issues have been active all across the nation.

Lobbyists for these groups work closely with elected officials to be certain that the elected officials “understand” the philosophy of their groups

and, at opportune times, rally their members to contact those same elected officials, all the while keeping their members apprised of the activities of the governing bodies. This interaction provides somewhat of a two-way conduit—although at times it tends to be rather biased.

With the emergence of the pro-active extremist groups, we are witnessing groups whose primary interests are social and moral issues, who also tend to be fiscally conservative—much more so than the traditional moderate Republicans or Democrats. These are groups who tend not to support many of the programs which have usually experienced adequate support from both of the major political parties—such as public education at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels, and programs designed to support and enhance communities like the extension services.

A variety of activities have traditionally been avenues for political activism. These include voting, working in a campaign, testifying at a public hearing, contacting a public official, being active at the community level or making a contribution.

Voting could be considered to be a more passive method of activism. An elected official can, perhaps, ignore with impunity a single voter or a single letter writer. However, the campaign volunteer who works many hours and the donor who makes a large contribution have potentially greater leverage, as does the special interest group which has a history of influencing a large number of voters. In contrast to the single vote, a letter or a conversation permit the transmission of much more precise messages about citizen concern (Verba, Schlozman, et al, 1993, p. 304).

The emerging extremist groups have been successful in gaining influence by focusing the interests of their followers to a few specific issues, communicating with those followers on a very regular basis, and aggressively promoting their agenda internally and externally. These groups are very active through participation in church activities, training members for political activism, the publication and distribution of issue-specific newsletters, tapes, videos and voter guides. While many of these activities are similar to those which have been used by the more traditional special interest groups, the weekly involvement in organized religious institutions has given these emerging groups a great deal of influence in a relatively short time. Their voter guides, which concentrate on a few specific issues, have given them substantial clout, especially in the primary election arena.

Nationwide, in the 1994 primary election, only 36 percent of the registered voters voted, and only 45 percent of the voting-age population voted in the general election. These low voter participation numbers enable

well-organized special interest groups to have more influence in the electoral process than their actual percentage of the population would indicate.

These emerging extremist groups have been very astute and successful in many areas of Kansas by taking over the local party positions as well as filling the party committeemen and committeewomen slots, thereby having an inordinate amount of influence in the political process.

In order for citizens to be involved in the policy formulation process, they must have a reason—an interest in politics, a concern regarding public issues, a sense that their actions will make a difference, a sense of civic responsibility. In addition to this psychological engagement in the political process, the availability of certain resources may have a profound effect on involvement. Resources which have the most effect are time, financial resources and civic skills (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1955, p. 273).

Time is used in many ways in the service of political action, such as attending a community meeting, working in a campaign or writing a letter to a public official. While all of us have 24 hours in each day, the amount of free time we have or are willing to make in our schedules varies greatly. The factors that affect free time are “life circumstances,” having a job, having a spouse with a job, and having children at home, especially preschool children—all these things diminish the amount of free time available (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1955, p. 273).

Money has become increasingly more important in the political process. The relative importance of money for campaigns increases with the level of the elected office. I do not regard this increased emphasis on the need for money in the electoral process to be positive. I am one who believes that the personal touch -- having the opportunity to meet the voters—should be most important.

To the extent that citizen politics in America relies increasingly on modes of activity that use money rather than time as a resource, the edge enjoyed by the already-advantaged is enhanced (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1955, p. 274). Those with family incomes over fifty thousand dollars have a much higher overall participation rate than those with incomes under twenty thousand dollars (Verba, Schlozman, et al, 1993, p. 305). Research demonstrates that those with real financial need are much less visible in the political process.

A very interesting contrast is revealed when we examine the receipt of government benefits and its relationship to the level of political activity.

Those who receive non-means-tested benefits, such as student loans, veterans' benefits, Medicare or Social Security, are at least as active as the public as a whole. In contrast, those who receive means-tested benefits such, as AFDC, Medicaid, food stamps or subsidized housing, are substantially less active than is the public as a whole. The differences imply that those who would be in most need of government response, because they are dependent on government programs, are the least likely to make themselves visible to the government through their activity, whether it be voting, working in a campaign or contacting a public official (Verba, Schlozman, et al, 1993, p. 305).

The third resource helpful for political participation is civic skills—those communication and organizational capacities that are so essential to political activity. Having the capacity to speak or write well, or to organize and take an active part in meetings, make an individual more effective when involved in politics. While the acquisition of civic skills will most likely begin at home and school, they may also be acquired as an adult at work, in organizations and in church.

Interestingly, church appears to be the least discriminating institution when it comes to acquiring civic skills, since there is no consistent relationship between education and church membership. Among those who attend church, there is relatively little stratification by education in terms of who makes a speech or organizes a meeting (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995, p. 275). It is apparent that the emerging extremist organizations have taken full advantage of this resource.

As to representing a very rural constituency, I find it incredibly challenging, interesting and rewarding. It requires many hours and miles, and provides some wonderful moments. Your "home town" interests grow to encompass your whole district as you make numerous new friends and acquaintances.

Rural Kansans are very independent people who are also very open and supportive, once they trust you. As a whole, rural Kansans are less negative about government and tend to be less radical than their urban counterparts. They are more involved in the political process, as is demonstrated by the fact that, in 1992 in my Senatorial District, 84 percent of the voting-age population was registered to vote, and 74 percent of the voting-age population turned out to vote in the general election. Both of these percentages were 10 percent higher than for the state as a whole. Nationwide only 45 percent of the voting-age population bothered to vote in both the 1990 and 1994 general elections.

My district covers nine and two-thirds counties, so it requires a great deal of traveling—an average of 45,000 miles per year on my car. Because the district is made up of many small towns, most of which have a community celebration every year, I have numerous opportunities to visit with my people. I attend these celebrations every year, and find that non-election years are more fun.

My goal as an elected official is to work to restore integrity in our public dialogue—to build trust—by informing, interacting with and involving as much of the public as possible. Trust empowers people.

It is important to me to have two-way communication with the people in my district, to stay in touch, to find ways for my constituents to interact more constructively in the political process. I work very hard to focus the public debate on policy issues and help people understand how these issues affect their everyday lives.

I have many well-publicized public meetings throughout my district—a pre-session tour, Saturdays during session, and a second listening tour before the wrap-up session. These local meetings are held in public places where citizens are comfortable considering and discussing policy issues. Local public meetings allow individual citizens to express their views on policy issues without having to compete with the loud voices of special interest groups.

During session, I write a weekly newsletter which is printed in many of the newspapers in the district. I also do four weekly radio reports which cover most of the district. All of this is done not only to keep the people in my district as well-informed as possible as to what is happening in the legislative session, but, just as importantly, to get their opinions and ideas.

I attend as many public functions as possible in and around my district, almost anytime, anywhere I am invited. I attempt to be very available to listen and discuss with my constituents. I answer all my mail and telephone calls. This personal contact helps to ensure the public that its input is valued.

Leaders must learn to listen in order to develop a give-and-take relationship with the public. We are responsible for promoting public debate as well as providing opportunities for our citizens to learn about and understand both sides of an issue, thus enabling them to have the opportunity to examine the options which are presented to public officials. Most of all, we must find ways to tap our citizens' sense of civic duty to improve our country's political health.

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